



South Africa builds global appeal

After a record-breaking performance last year, South Africa's tourism industry is poised for another big performance in 2011-12 reports CRAIG SINCLAIR.

IN 2010, THE NATION POSTED a 15.1 percent increase in international tourism arrivals, with eight million visitors exploring the country last year.

The growth has seen tourism forecasters outline an ambitious goal to almost double that number to 15 million international tourists by 2020.

Australia has been earmarked as one of the key markets for new arrivals and is now ranked within the top 10 source markets for South Africa.

But there are growing pains.

While the soccer World Cup helped the nation to record its record international arrival figures, many tourism sectors are now wallowing in a post-Cup lull, with slowing visitor numbers and dwindling length of stay. But despite the present trend, the long-term future remains bright.

South Africa Tourism's country manager for Australia and New Zealand, Nobulali (Lalie) Ngozi, said all the elements are in place for Australia to grow further.

"Australians have long been supporters of South Africa and this trend is growing as travellers become more aware of the unique attractions and experiences available," she said.

"The soccer World Cup went a long way to showing travellers some of the amazing tourism experiences available, as well as alleviating fears around issues, such as law and order."

Lalie said wildlife remained the foremost experience for travellers, but this was now being combined with other activities to create 'wildlife-plus' packages.

"Our biggest attraction remains wildlife and safari experiences, but these are now expanding to include activities such as horse-back or

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walking safaris. There is also growing interest in dining, arts and cultural activities as well as shark-cage diving, whale watching, sports tourism, golf and adventure escapes, so we are seeing a situation where travellers are planning their trips around wildlife, plus one or two other activities."

There is no denying the increased appeal of South Africa's tourism product offering following the soccer World Cup, and the massive investment in infrastructure is paying dividends with new roads, new tourism services and an improved commitment to delivering world-class service," she said.

"The soccer World Cup provided a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us to showcase our destination to the world. While FIFA commented the event was the best Soccer World Cup ever, we cannot sit on our laurels and there is plenty of hard work ahead to ensure we leverage on this success.

"We need to take these achievements to new heights and leverage the depth of new infrastructure we have available, if we are to achieve our goals."

Lalie said Australia was one of the markets continuing to grow rapidly in the wake of the World Cup.

"Australian arrivals grew by 30 percent in January 2011, with the average length of stay now eight days," she said.

"Australia is a wonderful travelling market, providing visitors in great numbers and exploring further afield. Generally speaking they are confident travellers looking for unique experiences, that are not too mainstream and offer great value.

"As such, we are seeing Australians heading to all parts of the country in search of activities that are exciting and far from ordinary.

"While pricing is always important, the strong Australian dollar is making the destination exceptional value.

"Because it is long-haul, airfares can be a big part of the total cost, but once they are on the ground, the value is amazing with an exchange rate of around six-to-one."

AIR CAPACITY TIGHT

But it isn't all smooth sailing, with the cost of flights from Australia still contributing a large part of overall holiday costs to South Africa.

While direct flights have the most appeal and demand, they can also be the most expensive, encouraging travellers to combine destinations by flying through a number of hubs, including Singapore, Bangkok, Malaysia, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Mauritius.

"We have seen V Australia pull out of the market recently and that will obviously make it harder for us to keep building numbers from Australia. However, we are also seeing more travellers exploring stop-over packages through a number of hubs," Lalie said.

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and Leisure Park on the central west coast hinterland, Safari Adventures is a short drive from everywhere on the island.

Launched by long-time lion handlers and trainers Graeme and Julie Bristow, the park offers visitors the opportunity to learn and interact with the animals through a choice of escorted experiences, including an opportunity to go walking with the lions.

Visitors are offered a range of interactions from educational talks through to a unique opportunity to become part of the pride. The 90-minute immersive experience culminates in a walk through the forest with the lions.

The experience begins with a safety briefing and educational talk that enhances understanding of how lions think and respond – along with a list of things to avoid while in the company of lions.

After spending time mixing with the lions, under the supervision of handlers in an enclosure, the gates to the forest reserve are opened.

The walk takes approximately an hour and follows the river cutting across the 2000-hectare estate. Visitors walk among the pride and watch them play, stalk and run as they please. Occasionally, the lions will find a rabbit on their walk, and nature will likely take its course, so visitors need to be prepared to watch real-life nature unfold.

Despite the apparent risks, the lion encounter is rated as among the safest in the world with thousands of walks conducted without incident. Slightly tamer is a cheetah encounter, where visitors can enter the enclosure to meet these graceful cats. The cheetahs are not aggressive or threatened by visitors and will occasionally rub against you like a domestic cat. They are also the only species of the big cats that purr.

To ensure the well-being of visitors, there are restrictions on the age and size of people entering the enclosure, with a minimum height of 1.5 metres required.

Because of the gentle nature of the cheetahs, guests as young as seven are welcome to visit, under strict supervision.



Not surprisingly, the experience is among the most popular in Mauritius, so bookings are essential.

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